

Our Life, God's Calling

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Peace be with you! Friends, today we continue with the church season known as Epiphany. This is the season of light, the season of the unveiling of the mystery of Jesus Christ to all people, Gentiles as well as Jews. This morning I'd like to focus on the second reading, which is the very beginning of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. These words sum up, in a very simple yet profound way, what the Christian life and faith is all about.

These simple words follow the form of a fairly conventional epistolary salutation in the ancient world – the way the ancients would address letters to people. But if we pay careful attention to them, we uncover extraordinary richness. He commences by identifying himself by name – Paul. We usually wait until the end of the letter before we identify ourselves (though even that convention seems to be out the window when it comes to texting. I don't know how many times I've received a text without any address at all, and I have to try to figure out who sent it.)

But Paul begins 1 Corinthians by naming himself. We know that Paul was a name that he took for himself after his conversion. Paul's original name was the Hebrew name, Shaul – Saul. But when he becomes a follower of Jesus, Shaul become Paul. Now this is in line with a very ancient Biblical practice, namely that after people encounter the Lord and begin following him they become someone *different*. Luther once said that we don't really know who we are until we find our identity in God. Before that we may have some identity but it is not our *true* identity – the fullness of who we are in Christ. We know who we are in the full sense when we are called by God. That's why Shaul becomes Paul.

Then he specifies who he is in terms of his *vocation*, his calling. **“Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.”** Notice first how he puts himself in the passive voice. He is not the “caller”; he is the one who “is called”, by a power beyond him, summoned by someone else. So much of our world today is predicated upon the primacy of the *active* voice. We hear it all the time...

“It's my life, and I will live it the way I choose.”

“Don't tell me what to do.”

“I did it my way.”

“I deserve this!”

“I'm going to look after myself for a change.”

It's all very much in the active voice. But what all of this does is it locks us into the narrow space of our own ego. If my life is merely my drama that I'm writing and producing and directing and starring in, then it is a very small and insignificant play. But my life – thank God! – is not about *me*. It is about being taken into the very life of the infinite God. That's what Jesus means when he says that we must lose our lives in order to find them. My life is not about me and your life is not about you. It is about a power that stretches infinitely beyond us. We are part of God's great

theo-drama that *he* is producing, directing, and writing. How wonderful – and how fulfilling – when we know we are called, identified, by that power.

How wonderful also, BTW, that we baptise babies in the Lutheran Church, rather than waiting until some so-called age of reason where they can “choose” for themselves. What are we communicating by this? The fact that we are, from the beginning, claimed by somebody else; that from infancy we are set in the wider context of Christ’s desire for us and for all people. We signal this right from the beginning that our lives are not about us, and then, all our life long, we live out the implications of this in service to God and to others, finding our ultimate fulfilment and satisfaction is giving our lives away. We are called, like Paul; we live in the passive voice.

Secondly, Paul tells us the shape of his call. He is called “**to be an apostle of Christ Jesus**”. Apostle – *apostelein* in Greek. It means to “be sent”, *posted*, like a letter. But a letter written not in ink but in words and in works – in flesh and blood and bone and breath. Paul’s basic ‘job’, indeed his whole identity, is to carry the message of Jesus to the world. And that is our identity as well. Every baptised Christian has this same identity. By our faith, our hope, our love, our commitment to the poor and the suffering and the broken, we carry Christ to the wider world – for we have been sent. And if we don’t do it, who will?

Now, having introduced himself, Paul goes on to identify who he is addressing in this letter. “**To the church of God that is in Corinth**”. Now Corinth, at Paul’s time, was a pretty rough town. It was on the coast on that narrow isthmus that connects the Eastern and Western parts of southern Greece. It was centre of trade, a place where lots of travellers came from all over the world. And so it was very cosmopolitan, with lots of ideas, lots of practices, lots of different religions. And it was also famously corrupt, filled with crime, sexual promiscuity, violence. Doesn’t sound all that different to modern Melbourne, does it?

Paul is addressing precisely this community – the Christians who were gathered in Corinth. He calls them a “church”, an *ecclesia*, which simply means those who have been “called out”. That’s what the church is; it is that society, that gathering of people, who have been called out of the world, out of the corruption and violence of the community in which they live. Now it is fair to ask: who does the calling, and what have they been called into. The caller of this *ecclesia* is none other than Christ himself, the same one who called Paul. He is the foundation of the Church, the Rock on which the Church is built.

And what have they been called *into*? Paul goes on to say, “**to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints**”. They have been called to a sanctified life, a life that is no longer dominated by violence, sexual indulgence, selfish ambition, the “me-first” culture that is so prevalent today and causes so much pain and heart-ache. You and I are also called to such a sanctified life, for that is what it means to be “saints”. Of course, this doesn’t mean that we will no longer fall into sin, or that we are to pretend a self-righteousness that we don’t possess (and won’t, until such time as we are called into the heavenly mansions).

But what it means is that these things – pride, lust, greed, violence, self-indulgence – are no longer our *lords*. We have been “set apart” from such things (that’s why the word “holy” means) and are now servants of a different Lord – the Lord whose way is that of humility and love and self-sacrifice. This is what we have been called into – the liveliness, and vitality and community of the self-giving God.

All of us then, who are members today of this Christian *ecclesia*, we are called to *think* differently, to *live* differently, to *act* differently, and to *react* differently. Why? Because belong to Christ, who was and is love incarnate. And it is this love that the world needs most of all, and you and I are called to such love – it is the purpose, the goal, the end, the single-minded task of our being as Christians. That is the ecclesiastical life.

Finally, Paul reveals the *universality* of this ecclesia. Listen: “...**with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours**”. Isn’t that wonderful? Now Paul is writing very early in the history of the church, only a few decades after Jesus’ resurrection. He had no idea what the Christian ecclesia would become – this world spanning mystical body. But *anyone* who Jesus has called out of the world into the church is brother and sister to us.

This has special significance in our day because many of our brothers and sisters around the world are under attack. If you want to get an idea of how widespread the persecution of Christians is today, go to the website **persecution.com** and you will see just how many Christians around the world are suffering and even being killed because of their witness to Jesus Christ.

Finally, what does Paul wish for this ecclesia? “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” These words should be familiar, because they constitute the liturgical greeting that pastors customarily use at the beginning of the sermon. So, what does ecclesiastical life give? Grace! Christians are those who know in their bones that everything they have is a *gift*, and that the greatest gift is to share in God’s own life by their incorporation into Christ. That’s the grace that Paul is offering here, and as a result of this grace, you have *peace*. Shalom.

The church is not about success (often the church is anything but successful). It’s not about worldly glamour (much of the church around the world is far from glamorous). It’s not about sensual pleasure or honour or riches. Rather, it’s the place where grace and peace are on offer – the peace that comes in surrender to God’s call, the peace for being a member of this community of love, the peace that deep-down everybody wants and needs – and that you and I have. Grace and peace – may you all know it and feel it and live it. And God bless you! In the name of Jesus, Amen.